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# *It's Noble But Is It Possible?*

Suzanne M. Erickson

Fr. Peter-Hans Kohlvenbach's challenge to the Jesuit colleges and universities assembled in Santa Clara in 2000 was inspiring and challenging, perhaps more than we knew at the time. I greeted Fr. Kohlvenbach's plea to return to our roots, to explore what being Jesuit means in a university setting, with enthusiasm and excitement. I feel strongly that the Jesuit universities need to stand for something unique and distinctive and to provide that "something" along with educational excellence to all of our students. A preference for the poor, a world-view, a focus on career as a way to improve society, seems to me to be a distinctive competence indeed.

I am a tenured finance professor within a Jesuit business school. As such I cannot speak for other professional schools and probably do not even speak for all of my colleagues in business. Caveat stated, to me personally, the challenge to think about business as a means to an end broader than shareholder wealth maximization, is exciting and energizing. In my biased view of the world, the business school is the school in all of our universities where the "Jesuit stamp" should be most pronounced. We are preparing tomorrow's business leaders. We are educating people who will have to choose between breaking rules for personal gain and making the right choice for the greatest number. To make a priority of molding ethical business leaders that will make a difference in people's lives through their compassionate leadership seems to me a noble calling indeed.

As much as I support Fr. Kohlvenbach's challenge *in theory*, I am doubtful whether it can ever come to pass *in reality*. The impediments to

change in professional schools stem from two sources. First, we faculty in professional schools are wholly unprepared, by our training, to deal with issues of social justice and a preferential option for the poor. Second, even if we were to make up our educational deficiencies, the reward structures within our schools and within our professions work against our pursuing these issues in any meaningful way.

*Preparation:* My colleagues and I all received our doctoral training in the theories of our chosen fields. We were never encouraged to look beyond the very narrow perspective of a sub-discipline within a discipline. Indeed, we would have been viewed as non-academic had we brought up the impact of business on the poor. Anything we now know about what it means to be Jesuit we have learned since being at our respective universities, by seeking out answers to our questions. While there are opportunities to educate ourselves, and my university provides many, there is certainly no obligation or reward for doing so. The burden for learning what it means to be Jesuit, and how to act upon that knowledge professionally, falls squarely on the faculty member after arriving at his or her Jesuit institution. If the faculty member should be so inclined. This leads to the second impediment.

*Rewards:* An untenured faculty member must rationally operate under the assumption that he or she may not get tenure. This means that the faculty member's research must be conventional enough that it would pass the grade at any business school. This effectively precludes any

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research with a Jesuit slant to it in my field. To be published in the accepted journals of our field, research must follow a certain format, tackle generally accepted issues and fit into the established view of what acceptable business research is. For a faculty member to investigate issues of social justice as they relate to business would be career suicide. If for any reason the faculty member were denied tenure, the research would not pass the rigor test of most other universities.

But let's assume for the moment that the junior faculty member is indeed a good candidate for tenure at his/her Jesuit institution. How would a body of research focusing on issues of social justice stack up in a tenure file at a Jesuit institution? Many universities "grade" research by the journal it is published in. Certainly in my field I cannot think of a single Finance journal that would find questions of social justice as appropriate material for their readers. The faculty member could publish in Business Ethics, but journals outside our subspecialty are typically viewed with suspicion. Is the faculty member publishing in business ethics because she can't hack it in finance? If the school ranks journals to grade research and the faculty member does not publish in the ranked journals, then clearly the research is not adequate.

This leads to the problem facing all faculty in our institutions. If faculty are evaluated on their research, journal rankings are inevitable. Accepting journals outside of our fields opens Pandora's box. If business ethics is OK for finance, is sociology OK? Clearly this is a path down which we do not want to venture.

*The Solution:* There may be a solution, but it requires a unity of purpose and a degree of enlightenment that I do not currently see in most universities. For our teaching and research to reflect the fundamental values of Jesuit education, the reward system in our universities

must reflect the importance of this work. For the reward systems to be changed, the top administration of the university, the deans, and indeed the faculty themselves must view issues of social justice as a priority. Unfortunately, I believe we are a long way from this consensus. I fear that reaching consensus on the importance of mission in our daily lives will be a Herculean task. Until the deans, administration and faculty agree on a vision for our mission, however, reward systems cannot change.

Even if consensus on the mission is achieved, restructuring of the reward system will require an implementation based on a holistic view of research. Simple rankings of journals will no longer suffice. Research will have to be read and evaluated for its contribution. Contribution to the mission of the university would be viewed as valuable and appropriate. This would undoubtedly take a lot of time. Are we that committed to living the mission?

What I am proposing is truly not radical. I am not arguing that research on social justice is all we do in professional schools; I am arguing that we make space for it in what we do. Not every faculty member will find these issues interesting and that is fine. But surely in a Jesuit university there must be space for the researcher who wants to investigate the effect of business actions on the greater good.

Imagine just for a moment what a truly Jesuit university could look like. Faculty would pursue high levels of all kinds of research, traditional theoretical, applied, pedagogical as well as research that relates our professions to the mission of the university. Our research informs our teaching and helps students think beyond themselves to living as "men and women for others." A Jesuit degree would guarantee an employer that the student was technically proficient, ethically grounded and able to take a global perspective on issues of importance. Jesuit



graduates would be widely perceived as being different, as offering more.

One thing we in business know for sure is that you get what you measure. If the reward structure and compensation system are not changed, it is certain that behaviors will not change and Fr. Kohlvenbach's vision will remain just that.



Photo Courtesy of St. Louis University